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Renowned as one of the foremost literary masterpieces within the British Canon, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has become a bulwark for literature classes around the globe.

Shakespeare's characters, while conflicted and agonized by the choices they make, are forced to come to terms with those decisions. Gertrude, who stands in the middle of much of the chaos within the play, has her own choices for which to atone. Although she believes otherwise, Gertrude openly commits adultery within the play.

While denying she is an adulteress, Gertrude is nonetheless unfaithful toward her deceased husband. Although she believes that she is correct in marrying Claudius, she is truly committing adultery. Gertrude's most ardent critic is **most notably** her son Hamlet. When Hamlet confronts his mother about what she has done, he says that "you have my father much offended" (Shakespeare 773). Hamlet openly accuses his mother of committing adultery with Claudius. She has stained the legacy of Hamlet and his father by marrying Claudius.

Hamlet's reason for being so upset with his mother can be attributed to **the fact that** her actions directly affect the entire family. Writer Noel Blincoe notes that "Gertrude's incestuous liaison with Claudius pollutes the blood of both the younger and elder Hamlet" (Blincoe 20). In this way Hamlet realizes that the offense committed by Gertrude is not only against him but also his father. Gertrude has openly wronged both her husband and her son, and Hamlet believes that she must come to terms with this choice.

Part of Gertrude's struggle with adultery stems from her inability to be without a husband. Hamlet **notes** early on that Gertrude is unable to lead a life without a husband. He **notes** that "frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 733). Hamlet believes that his mother is a frail woman who is unable to live without the attachment of a man. However, in giving in to this yearning for another husband, Gertrude seemingly loses sight of the importance of honoring her deceased husband. She marries Claudius and gives up any sense of honesty and purity she has. Her womanly wholesomeness is stained by her own inability to refrain from an incestuous bond with Claudius.

The major issue at hand with Gertrude's relationship to Claudius is that she simply does not take enough time to mourn her husband's death. In keeping in mind Hamlet's idea of his frail mother, Blincoe also notes that "Hamlet's biting censure of his mother rests on the biblical principle that man and wife form a union of one flesh" (Blincoe 20). Gertrude breaks this bond when she hastily joins a new union with Claudius. She does not allow herself enough time to grieve and accept her husband's death. Rather, she moves on quickly – in just a mere month's time – to take Claudius as her new husband.

While Gertrude's adultery may seem somewhat obvious, there is a problem with the conclusion drawn. The major issue with assuming Gertrude's adulterous ways is that the dumb show performed by the troupe of actors alludes to Gertrude not being engaged in an incestuous relationship with Claudius. Derived from Hamlet's own imagination, the dumb show exhibits Gertrude as an innocent queen who has no emotional or sexual attachment with the king's brother. Instead, the blame is placed entirely on the murderer – a thinly veiled Claudius – who kills the king and steals his wife. However, one can find an explanation for this as the dumb play merely represents Hamlet's own ideas as to what has transpired. After all, the ghost of King

Hamlet tells his son early on to “leave [Gertrude] to heaven” (Shakespeare 742). The ghost’s yearning for Hamlet to accept the innocence of his mother has forced him to assume that she would not be unfaithful to her deceased husband.

Although Gertrude certainly does not stand out as a villain within the play, her marriage to and supposed love for Claudius necessitate careful scrutiny. Her inability to come to terms with her incestuous bond with Claudius hinders her persona. The problem with her relationship with Claudius is that it affects her entire family – both her husband and son. Moreover, she lacks the confidence to lead a life sans-man, and the bond she shares with Claudius creates a misinterpretation between King Hamlet and his son. Despite Gertrude believing that she is not committing adultery, her actions indicate otherwise.

Works Cited

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